

Matt (host): Welcome back to the nimble youth podcast. Today, we are addressing the elephant in the room, which is the frequency of school shootings in America, in The US, and how students are dealing with the collective trauma that these shootings constantly engender and reinforce. As we're recording this on August 28, yesterday morning at about 08:30AM, a 23 year old shooter entered a church, a Catholic church in Minneapolis opening a fire, killing two elementary school students, one age eight, one age 10, and injuring 17 others. It's just another one in a long line of tragedies that today's students are becoming perhaps tragically numb and inured to. It's kind of like a wartime situation in many cases.

And so there are many things we could talk about, potential solutions. It's always, I think, the right time to talk about policy. And certainly not every option has been exhausted. And we do need to have that discussion. This podcast, our purview here is mental health.

So for the time being, we'll stay focused on the collective trauma that these shootings engender in our student population and talk a little bit about some of the active measures that schools are taking to help kids stay safe when the unthinkable happens, which unfortunately is much too often. I'm gonna read a little bit from a report on NPR about some steps that these very young children took. But, so this is from the NPR report again. In a press conference on Wednesday, Annunciation Catholic school principal Matthew DeBoer said staff members moved students under the pews within seconds of the shooting. Adults were protecting children.

Other children were protecting younger children, he said. It could have been significantly worse without their heroic actions. So when we as adults can't fully keep our children safe, they are keeping each other safe, which is, yeah, again, just really tragic. So Nicole, let's talk a little bit about how you see these constant episodes impacting the student population. And I guess, you know, things like, you know, how does gun violence impact day to day operations at the school?

What sort of things are you doing to address this potentiality?

Nicole Beale: I'll start by just saying that, you know, it's always awful every time, every school shooting to see that students have gone to the place where they are supposed to feel safe and protected. And, you know, we want students every day to come to school, and parents expect them to come back home, ideally better than they left. So it's always just horrifying to really think about what that is like for someone who leaves to go to school and does not come home. So I just wanna kinda say that to start. But I will also say these mass shootings have unfortunately become so commonplace that what I have seen is a pretty steep decrease in folks, especially teenagers, honestly, their reaction or noticing that they're happening.

I was working in college admissions and when the Columbine shooting happened, and the world stopped, I felt like, for weeks. And then I feel like people really stopped around the mass shooting at Sandy Hook. But it seems now that it's almost like it happens so frequently that I don't even think our students know when one has occurred. And, you know, they were after Parkland High School. I mean, they were doing walkouts, and they were doing all kinds of things.

And I bet if I asked most students, unless they were paying attention to the news and were really aware, I bet they may not even know the shooting happened yesterday because it does it pops up as a news blip. I mean, it used to shut all the news stations down, and you would watch it on multiple channels and really follow it. Now it's, like, buried in with all the other headlines that there was even a shooting. And so I don't think that students, as a general rule, if it's far away from them, I don't know that they're paying as close of attention. Now if it is close and we have had some close shootings to where we are, there was certainly much more anxiety around that when it became real.

But they are very much desensitized to things that are happening outside of their little world. As far as practical things, you've gotta remember that this is a group of students who have been doing lockdown drills their entire school career. So their entire school career, they have either been on real or drills. So they've been on real lockdowns where most of the time that's something in the community where the school is in a real lockdown or they have been in a lockdown drill. So we try to prepare them every year.

All educators are required to watch trainings on what to do in case of an active shooter. And so that is something that's covered. All schools have a safety plan and someone who manages that. Just today at the high school where I work, we had a random metal detector day, which meant that all students had to enter all day through a metal detector. Unfortunately, what that does to operations is it means that number one, our students end up out of well, our students some of them just walk through it nonchalantly.

Some of them, it really increases their anxiety if they get there and see that they've got to walk through a metal detector because they're always questioning, is this random or did something happen? Because parents will text me and they'll say, do we have metal detectors today because x, y, and z happens? And I'm like, no. It's just a random metal detector day. And so that reaction is, what if they're telling me what's going on?

What if I'm not safe today? So for some students and then some students are annoyed. And then there are some students that really take advantage of the fact that all the administrators and all the counselors and all the people who are out there to support are doing metal detectors, and we're not as available to be in the hallways to make sure that students are in class instead of gathering in the hallways or that they are not in bathrooms or that they're not leaving campus. And all the things that we do operationally get pushed to the side because it takes all hands on deck in order to do a metal detector day.

Matt (host): Yeah. There's an existential threat. You can't worry about the minutiae.

Nicole Beale: Right. Right. Right.

Matt (host): Yeah. Absolutely. So what are some of the things sort of drill wise that you're doing? I think we've all seen newsreels from the 1950s where at that time you know there was the

threat of atomic bombs being dropped and Right. So we see students you know sort of crouching under their desk which is kind of quaint to us now.

I grew up in the you know went to school in the 1980s in the Washington DC area and by that time you know we knew it would be vaporized instantly you know. So we didn't worry about things like that but now you know these students are taking active measures to protect themselves and so are there specific drills and things that are practiced at the high school level?

Nicole Beale: Sure so we practice and I can't go into some of the exact location details but we work on helping students find places that are away from windows, making sure doors can be locked quickly, making sure that students have and all teachers are aware of who's in their room so that we know who all is in there as every like, taking good attendance, having a good we know who all the students are so we can account for them, making sure that we aren't blocking communications by over communicating during the time of because we're gonna need only important communications going through, you know, one or two people so that the people, the police I mean, that you know, when it becomes a real thing, certainly, that's turned over to folks that are not school people. And so we wanna make sure that they are in a position to be able to do their job. And so we just make sure that teachers have a really good plan for what they're gonna do. And I won't really say what those plans are, but the students do those plans. And, our training always talks about what our options are in terms of a school shooter.

So, basically, and their official words for it, and I apologize for not being able to come up with them, but, basically, you can stay in place, you can run, or you can fight. And so those are the the the three options in terms of a you know, so when you were talking about the teachers protecting and students protecting and some of that was a stay in place model where maybe students were where adults were also fighting that someone was trying to keep the intruder sometimes at you know, one of the things we have to prepare for as a school is what to do if a shooting happens after school or happens at lunch when people are not I mean, when people are actually in classrooms and captured where they're supposed to be, we have some pretty good places

Matt (host): Controlled environment.

Nicole Beale: Is somewhat controlled, but you don't get to control what happens. Mean, at my own school, we had an isolated shooting incident last year, and it was certainly not a mass shooting, but it happened at school dismissal. And so that made it more challenging to implement the plans that we had practiced. And our staff did an excellent, excellent job with the students and working with them and so did our police and keeping students safe and reunified. But it was really eye opening, when we have been at athletic practices and have heard that there's an active shooter possibly in the community nearby because I'm in an urban school school setting, then how do you get that communication out to coaches?

How do you get coaches to make sure folks are safe? So we just try to really think through all the different scenarios and make sure the adults are as prepared as we can be so that we have

the best chance of keeping students safe. Right. And not to I'm certain you know, from a mental health standpoint, which is what we're focusing on and not not gun gun violence laws, which I would love to talk about, although I would certainly not be an expert in it. I would say when you talk about anxiety, the more the adults have a plan, the less anxious the students are.

And so it's really important that every adult knows what the plan is and can reassure students that we have a plan. Because there are things beyond our control, but making sure even taking something like a metal detector day and using it as an opportunity to speak to students and connect with students. We found last year on random metal detector days that our discipline was less once the school day got going because students were all greeted at the door by several adults. So trying to just turn it into an opportunity to connect with students so that maybe they also don't experience some of the things that we know that shooters experience. I mean, so that they feel connected to the school and connected to adults.

So that's another thing is trying to turn something that is logistically a bit of a nightmare into an opportunity to connect with kids.

Matt (host): Yeah. Absolutely. And so the presence of metal detectors you found at least sort of calmed students or certain groups of students rather than increasing anxiety. Right? I mean I suppose it's somewhat a reminder of that potential event happening but knowing that there's some layer of security in place is helpful.

Nicole Beale: Maybe. I think it's a mixed bag. I think some of it depends on how safe are the communities that they live in.

Matt (host): Right.

Nicole Beale: And so how often do they experience gun violence outside of school is also a factor as far as their anxiety. So if there is a lot of gun violence in their neighborhood, they may either be immune to it or school might be a place where they don't have to think about it. And so and if they live in a community where there is less gun violence, you know, our communities, you know, more poverty, more gun I mean, know, different areas have more problems, then all of a sudden, they may be reminded that they are not in their little safe bubble, and then that can increase anxiety. But I do think there is a level of knowing, hey. This student went through with their stuff.

I mean, so if they hear things, if Internet rumors are circulating about possible that happens, you know, all the time about possible gun violence that's a lot of times it's a hoax. So that day, especially on one of those days, if it happens to be a random day that we have metal detectors, I think it can be very reassuring.

Matt (host): Yeah. There's got to be an issue sort of these threats that come through that end up being nothing thankfully.

Nicole Beale: Right.

Matt (host): But it's sort of the crying wolf scenario. Right? You have to take it seriously but if it's coming at you all the time it's kind of, you know, it's got to be impactful certainly.

Nicole Beale: Certainly for our administrators and our police folks who, you know, our law enforcement who have to track them all down and have to be really really sure that it indeed is not credible.

Matt (host): And I think you know unfortunately with the lack of effective policy solutions thus far I guess it's hard to speculate whether anything will ever change then we have to rely on just being ready, being prepared and potentially using technology as well to help. And so the proximity of the violence seems to be the shooting seems to be a factor as well right. Something happening in Minneapolis won't affect students so much in North Carolina but if it's closer to home, it's just it becomes more real and and more immediate. Right?

Nicole Beale: Yeah. Certainly, we had some students that are especially students who already ran anxious who were very anxious last year after our shooting. There was one a couple years back at another local high school, and there were folks that had real you know, maybe I'm not clinically diagnosing them with PTSD, but they really had that fear of what they were experiencing that day and where they were and the unknowns. And those were days when things felt really, really real. And so for some of the students, that became, you know, a huge anxiety point that was hard for them to get past as far as going into that space again.

Matt (host): We could talk, at length, about this topic and I think about potential solutions to it. But we just wanted to address this. And for the parents out there who might be worried about their students, I think it's somewhat reassuring to know that this potential is taken seriously. And it's a topic of concern for the administrators as well. Correct?

Nicole Beale: Yes. I mean, we are going to do everything we can control to keep students safe.

Matt (host): Right.

Nicole Beale: And I don't know an educator out there that doesn't feel the same way, that's going to do everything we can to try and make plans and certainly the district safety team. I mean, there are folks that spend their entire career trying to make sure all of our students feel safe in all of our schools. And then the educators take it seriously, which they do, and make sure that we have that we're very up to date on the plans and can keep students safe. That's something that we all take very, very seriously.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. Do you have a place where you're at, do you have a, like, a school resource officer from the police?

Nicole Beale: We have two.

Matt (host): You have two?

Nicole Beale: At our high school.

Matt (host): So do you find that increases confidence?

Nicole Beale: The school resource officers, like if there is something that we fund as a public, in my mind can never be taken away, it's school resource officers. They are amazing individuals who connect to students not only for safety and for community, but their knowledge and ability to be safe spots and show law enforcement in such a positive way with students is just that they are remarkable humans in the way that they partner with the students and the educators to keep students safe. Resource officers are amazing, amazing humans that are probably grossly underpaid.

Matt (host): I'm sure they are. Yeah.

Nicole Beale: Right.

Matt (host): Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Well, thank you for Nicole, your insight on this. It's a topic that I wish we didn't have to address. But I think given the recent news events, we wanted to at least approach the topic and give parents some perspective on it.

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